

Am I Dreaming by dropout-ninja

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Summary: 5 times Billy Hargrove's story didn't end and the 1 time it did- These will vary from AUs that made only a small change to canon, to wild theorizing, to larger for want of nail AUs. All 5 will be unconnected to each other.

1. Chapter 1

Stranger Things and its characters do not belong to me. All rights go to their respective owners.

Warnings: Major spoilers for season 3 and the previous seasons. Brief language. Wild guessing about the Upside Down.

I didn't care one way or other about Billy in season 2: didn't really hate him and wasn't a fan either. Come season 3 and I felt disappointed in his death. Yeah, it was predictable. Too predictable- we knew he'd die the moment he crashed his car and the scene itself felt so cliché, like something seen in so many other shows/movies. As someone who fell in love with Stranger Things last year because of how impressed I was with how they subverted tropes and character archetypes with Steve in season 1, I couldn't help be a little sad they didn't try to explore the fallout of Billy surviving season 3 after everything that his "flayed" body had done.

If any of you are similarly disappointed or like wildly speculating AUs, I hope you enjoy these!

He remembered dying. That had been the point, he was pretty sure. He remembered the pain. It could have killed him with one hit. But that didn't amount to enough pain for his audacity, did it? His mind, his sides, finally his chest. All the pain amounted to dying.

But he remembered dying. And the dead shouldn't remember.

The first time Billy had seen this place was a brief visit outside the public telephone. There had been no warning that he was about to be transported to this hellish region. It had seemed like a nightmare, a horrible hallucination- not like a real event that his body had been forced to endure.

Now, it seemed that original feeling wasn't far off. Because his body was dead. He had felt every moment of agony to prove that fact. His body was dead but the nightmare continued. *It* didn't need a body, only a mind.

It was just like the telephone by the road all over again. The blue dark world with shadows, slime, and spores. Just like before, Billy had no clue what it was. This time, he was able to get a better look around and found that it was without doubt Hawkins. A twisted, empty, monstrous version of the stupid town, but the town none the less. Cars, roads, houses: all where they should be. Was it some kind of mental plane? A dream world? An alternate dimension? The gigantic shadow above him when he woke up gave him no answer. Billy figured it had to be some sort of mental realm because *he was alive* and last he checked he had been stabbed. Multiple times.

The thing was right above him, floating in the polluted air amongst red storms and earning an immediate "shit!" screamed out among other embarrassing cries. It was as bad as the mill, when he had been dragged down to a very similar looking monster that had hijacked his life. Judging from the feelings filtering through the air, *permeating it*, it was that same monster, no matter if it was no longer fleshy, that was hijacking his unlife. Those feelings had surrounded him when he was "possessed" even when he was acting on his own at the very end; those feelings would never be forgotten or unrecognizable.

So to awake, the memories of dying fresh on his mind and the cause unbearably close, in this place had him reacting the first way his inexplicably intact body decided to: run. After tiring out in the cold, Billy stopped and rested his hands on his legs. As he panted, he glanced around frantically. He had woken up somewhere that resembled a field overgrown by some sort of moss he had never seen in the living world before, with the giant monster far above and forests around. Now, his mind tried to catch up with his body and was in the process of panicking. The panic skyrocketed when the feeling returned. He thought he could see tendrils crawling across the ground between trees, flying in the air; all hidden in shadows, all coming towards him. Starting off again in perfectly justifiable terror, Billy bolted forward- waving against the white spores floating in the air in an effort to keep them away from his mouth and eyes.

This time, his feet stumbled across the branches, roots, and 'moss' growths on the ground. After a few of these false alarm stumbles, Billy slid on something beneath him and fell on the ground. Immediately he tried to ignore the pain in his chin where he had hit

it because *he wanted up again right now*. One arm was elbow deep in some sort of stringy clear slime that broke where the hand had landed. The strands lay against the arm and every part of his body that had made contact with the ground was now coated in *something*. With another noise and wide eyes, Billy frantically pulled himself up to his feet and stared at what was beneath him. What was coating many of the trees. What cocooned a strange round thing nearby on the ground.

And to make matters worse, he could still *feel* it nearby. Just there. Not trying to kill him. Not trying to talk to him using his own appearance like it had the first time he had been thrown in here. Billy didn't know why he was still alive.

With only his killer nearby and this twisted version of an Indiana forest around him like something out of a nightmare, Billy didn't even know if he wanted to be alive.

After a while, Billy assumed it didn't matter if he wanted to be alive or not. The monster made of shadows wanted him to be- and it got what it wanted. If it didn't...Billy still remembered the pain every stab caused as answer to that.

Why, he didn't know. It never talked to him in the human sense of speaking. He could feel it, like he could when it was inside him passively and not taking direct control. Could feel its anger. Could feel its enjoyment. It seemed to exude both towards him when it would get near. When it wasn't, the human felt like he could breathe again.

On that matter, the less metaphorical breathing he did here was far less pleasant. The air hurt; it was cold and felt sick- he felt perpetually nauseous breathing it.

After breathing, eating and drinking were the next priorities of a living being. But Billy wasn't sure if he was a living being. Not in the least because the food he could find around tasted like poison and not something meant for human consumption. There were egg things in the forests. There were vines that wiggled until they had been smashed up enough, and after he had crushed the movement out of

them he found he could not eat something that reminded him too much of the monster's tendrils that had been shoved against his mouth- nope. Not eating those. The rest of the 'food' he could find was similar; the most edible looking of the growths in this dead world and not real human food. He was 90% sure everything he had tried to eat was actually poison and he just couldn't die from it because he had no real body to be poisoned, as his current guessing supposed.

The horrid edibles were even worse when it was discovered they couldn't be washed down. As far as Billy could see, there was no water or even twisted slimy version of it in here. Creek beds were just beds. Drinking fountains didn't work. To drive the final nail in the hole, all of the places with pools in the real world had only vine covered empty basins in their place.

He remembered how *it* had felt when he went to the pool-*uncomfortable*. Then his frantic shower- *pained*. The ice bath seemed to be the only water his possessed body could get in without feeling some sort of pain and then anger.

When he had realized there was no water here and sat down in frustrated failure, he felt the remnants of those feelings again. These filtered in with more of that enjoyment and Billy flipped up both middle fingers at the taunting before moving to the other side of Hawkins to get away from the presence.

Billy didn't die from dehydration though; after testing this and being just as horribly alive in three days without water, he gave up on torturing himself with food he didn't need.

His theory gradually grew: he had no physical body because it had been brutalized after he had stood against the monster, his current body felt hunger, thirst, and exhaustion but could continue on with or without the cures to those natural ailments, he was somehow alive in a mirror world he shared with the monster. His theory was eventually summed up as: this is hell. Killing him had only been part of the spiteful response to his revolution and this struggle against the twisted environment was the next part.

He had infuriated it. And pissing it off was not making Billy's (after?)life easier.

He remembered the monster's fleshy avatar roaring into the radio. It was a taunt, from the human perspective at least. It was petty, in all honesty. The thing had the fight in the bag (or would have, had circumstances gone as predicted)- taunting was just an extra jeering mockery to the humans that tried to stand against it. Billy understood that- he gave his fair share of taunts. He mocked the weak guys that tried to stand up to him at schools and gangs, preferably after beating them up cathartically. Should any of his "friends", the lackeys that flocked with him (*his mind thought of his unfortunate senior year spent in Hawkins, the faces of Tommy H. in all its disgusting glory and the popular whore Carol springing to mind along with some of the others he had met in basketball and parties; certainly not people he cared about but those that he spent time with-* graduating at least meant getting away from those lowlifes and replacing old lackeys with acquaintances like Heather), tried to jump from him to a different "king" he would have beaten them into the ground like he had Steve Harrington- and laughed the whole time like he had for "king Steve"'s beating as well. Kick them while they're down. That's the best way to keep up dominance and scare others from trying anything; awfully fun as well. The no-holds-barred fights were because he was no pussy. The taunting that followed were because he wanted to. The roar in the radio was because it wanted to. The stupidly villainous speech (read: taunt) they delivered the psychic kid in that mindscape had no purpose except to taunt.

Hell, killing him dramatically in front of all and painfully, unnecessarily slowly, *all to just bring his mind into this trap with it* had no real purpose but vengeful mockery.

It was pettier than him, Billy thought with a laugh. Somehow, he had insulted it, the eldritch abomination towering multidimensional mind-controlling shadow monster, just by being, well, a human. By remembering his mom. By wanting to protect the kid that had reminded him about her even if that kid was a friend of Max's.

He had the vague recollection of Max, crying over him as he faded out from fatal injuries. Why she did, he couldn't tell. It wasn't like they were

close or anything. It wasn't like they loved each other or something sappy like that. And, during those days of hell with the monster in his body, he had done things that should have kept her away but instead made him want to say those telling words, "sorry", to the crying fiery redhead.

Breaking that control- yup, that was unforgivable. Not abducting Heather. Not forcing people to their deaths so that their body could melt into a spidery form. A form just made for killing a kid that had stood up to the monster. Not any of that...but being his own person and making a decision to save a bit more time for that kid? Totally unforgivable. Billy rolled his eyes and barked a mocking laugh again. The big bad monster was *petty*.

The door creaked too loudly in the silent world when he found his old house. The last time he had been here involved freezing baths and even less unpleasant things. Now the cheap place was overgrown with the nasty moss and clear stringy slime. It was everywhere in this place. Billy tried to ignore it as he stumbled for the corrupted bed and pulled what growth he could off it before sliding on. He laid back on it and just stared wide eyed at the ceiling, arms fiddling before finally relaxing on top of himself (the only place marginally clean to rest them). In the still air, his breaths rattled; they were the only sounds in the room and it put Billy on edge.

As it turned out, he didn't need to sleep. It seemed to confirm his guess that he really had lost his body. That this was just some sort of figment. He didn't just not need sleep, he couldn't. He waited on that bed for what had to have been a few days, waiting for the adrenaline to wear off and for exhaustion to force sleep. It never happened. Whatever kept him existent here didn't want him to sleep. If his other guess, that it had been the monster he wanted nothing more than to escape from that was forcing him to "live" here, was also true than he supposed it was just another punishment. After all, sleep had pros and cons and here the pros felt more tempting to Billy.

Sleep- Pros: rest and escape from reality. Cons: nightmares and oversleeping.

When the world he was, so far to his knowledge, alone in was a nightmare why would dreams be a worse pain than reality? After

finally giving up, with no small amounts of resigning hysterics, he figured it made sense. Being sleepless was horrible and so far "horrible" seemed to be his entire existence here. Speaking of...

He felt it before he saw the light flash in the distance. The red could be seen from the window and it illuminated part of the twisted rendition of his room before it faded away. But the feeling froze the top of his spine seconds before the signs of alien lightning started. It was back- although the thing was HUGE (an understatement even) and could no doubt reach him no matter how far he ran in this mirror world so saying "it was back" felt stupid. From what he could tell, it could simply feel him from wherever he was-

...so the brief respite he had was likely purposeful.

That kid had talked to him about his mom; she had described the beach he and his mom had visited. That child liked to hide under his covers from monsters. For a brief, sleeplessly hysterical and exhausted, moment he felt the urge to do the same. Instead, Billy stumbled out from his room and house. He had come there to finally sleep and instead realized slowly he could not. Only once realized did the petty-iest world destroyer come back to taunt. It was still very far away, when Billy craned his neck to look up over the roof towards the storm that heralded it. Not that distance mattered when it was both larger than any building he had seen and could crawl into any mind.

"What? What now? Just waiting for me to find out what else you've ruined?" he screamed up despite the terror of yelling at the very thing that had so twisted his life around.

Unsurprisingly there were no words in response. Only its strange otherworldly noises and what seemed like very palpable anger filtering in the very air around him.

He slid to the ground, still feeling very in need of the sleep his fake body couldn't get. Head leaned back, mouth parted, hands running through dirty thick hair that was both covered in a film that was never there before he had awoke in this place and rattled together unattractively; it was likely a picture of despair. The monster probably got off on it. Thinking that, he tried to pull himself together

under its eyeless gaze.

It was still far; Billy didn't want to be under it when it got closer but in truth he didn't seem to have much choice. He didn't want to be here at all but there was no choice there either. In truth, he wasn't sure if he would rather be dead than alive. Death would be the end but he wanted to escape. He wanted to escape and go back to the world without any monsters around him. He had no idea what he would do in that world, with Heather and her family and everyone else he had caused to melt shadowing his conscious and Max with her crew he had almost ran over (twice now) remembering it all.

Impossible- the feeling seemed explained by the cold infected world around him with *its* five limbed shadow overhead and the most overbearing of memories on hope. Hoping for his mother to return? Hoping to surf and not be called a pussy? Hoping his dad wouldn't go through with it with that new woman and her kid?

Hoping to go back to the real Hawkins (let alone California)? About as likely as the first three had been.

Billy cussed a long and vocal stream of expletives at the thing in the air that was forcing that message of impossibility on him. It probably wouldn't do him any good- acting out against the creature had been what got him into this hell in the first place. Who cared. He was stuck here so he was sure as hell going to cuss it out because it had dragged him back into existence right after death and he had never asked for either of those statuses of mortality.

He was reminded of those words spoken by his avatar in that strange mindscape: "You let us in. And now you are going to have to let us stay."

Amusement seemed to filter into reach at his thought. It hadn't been his willing decision to "let us in" back at the mill. If he still had a body that slept and dreamt, Billy knew he would never stop the haunting nightmares repeating that night. The same kind of tendrils that "ended" his life pulling at his leg- *the fleshy, slimy feeling wrapped around his calf and tighter than something so disgustingly soft should be in its grip*- holding him in place- *and there he had seen the creature, the mass of legs and flesh and unearthly horror in the shadows just out of*

plain sight- slamming onto his face-

The memory was still as vivid. It needed no physical sleep and dreams to drag his mind into that moment and relive it all.

No. Billy Hargrove had not willingly opened his mouth and mind to be flayed by a nightmare. But his consent or lack of was a moot point- it didn't care if it was let in willingly or not, but it did care to **stay**.

So, partially in fear and hope, and partially in pure spite, Billy ran. He may just be a pawn piece on a game board that could be picked up and toyed with in whatever way the player desired, but damned if he wasn't going to make things a little harder on the bastard.

Electronics. It took too long to notice it, but through one time stumbling through the empty version of Hawkins it began to click.

He could mess with electronics *there* even when he was *here*. He could turn on a radio and adjust it. He could yell into phones, although so far he never received a tangible response back so he had no way of knowing that he was actually heard. He could affect lights by physical presence. At least, he imagined he could do all those. It sparked a bit of excitement, a bit of hope- all until he remembered his body there had gaping holes in it. Without that body, how exactly could he get back?

Most of the times he thought that, he could feel that incessant prickle and something taunting that was somehow communicated by the thing that didn't talk (it could though since the first time he had been here it had talked to him using his own form) and he would move from his location to a different one as if it could get him away from the "voice".

He dropped by his old house once and went to Max's room. He had nothing to say to his dad or his dad's wife but the more he thought about it the more he wanted to say more than just the word 'sorry' to the kid. How to say anything wasn't discovered. Once he thought he heard someone but it sounded like an echo very far away. When the presence of the monster came near, he left again.

But while he had been wandering pointlessly for however many weeks he had been stuck here, that day he felt a hint of purpose. Body or no, there was no chance he would wait around for death in the infected forest with it hanging over him in all its petty vengeful glory.

He'd go back to Max's room. Maybe visit the places of the others he recognized during that mall battle and try to mess with their electronics to get attention. Billy had no plans to play the games on the monster's terms even if it felt like those were the only terms open to him now.

The Upside Down did not like to let go. Will Byers could attest to that, although Billy was oblivious to that story. The defiant did not get easy escape. Will had been defiant; he had ran from his monster, contacted his mother, and ultimately was rescued from the parallel world. But the world did not let go of him. It held on to him, gestating larvae inside his young body and possessing it through the shadow monster's will.

Billy's defiance had offered the easy escape of death and then held it out of reach. The Upside Down had claimed him too and planned to always stay in his life.

Will Byers still felt it- anxiety spiking down his back, centered on his neck. Exorcism had not allowed complete release. The Upside Down never released those it had claimed. No matter what defiance or escape they attempted.

AN- This will be updated and finished (before the end of the year at least)- there could possibly be a continuation of one of the 5 "routes" if reviewers want to see more of one of the branch-off AU's.

Thank you for your time! Please leave a review :D

2. Американцы

Prisoner 024 keeps trying to tell them he can't remember.

But something remembers for him.

Warnings: Major spoilers for season 3 and the previous seasons, undescribed death. There are a few references to the book Runaway Max but not enough to be called spoilers for it.

Personally, this one feels like it's basically a crack-fic that took some of the theories for who the "american" could be, accepted them all, and then added Billy even though there is really no way he could be the mentioned american. The Russians here are probably very far from accurate, but then so were season 3's Russians so...

Most of the italics are people speaking in Russian

(Updated chapter because I had to fix a few mistakes

"The first one showed up inside that netherland heavily injured. What do you expect to get from this one that we haven't already dragged from that svolach'?" asked a gruff, frustrated voice.

"Mealtime for our special guest, if nothing else," another giggled.

The third voice spoke up, *"The less injured one is more promising than that child; you are correct in assuming the young one isn't likely part of the scientists and american authorities that started or dealt with this. But he could offer us something those cannot- insider perspective."*

The Russians didn't listen to him. Their uniform was what made him assume their race, but where he was and why there were Russians around was all lost on him.

They dragged him into this same room to ask him the same questions even when his answer never changed. The interrogator would speak first, sometimes told to say something not on his paper by the officer

that would stand in the back of the room. The translator would then do his titular job and press for answers on *why he was here, what the 'netherland' was, what had happened in Hawkins, etc.*

"I don't remember!" he yelled as best he could every time.

And he really, truly, did not.

When he crashed by the old mill, something nasty and unearthly was on his windshield. Billy remembered that.

The thing down below, all flesh and spines and bones, was not something naturally found on earth. Billy remembered that thing as well. He remembered how it turned his stomach. The way it made previously apathetic memories of breaking bones, and gleeful memories on being pulped and returning the favor to his assailant, turn sour inside.

What happened down there he remembered, what happened after- it was that he was less sure on.

The existence of monsters was what he remembered from the old mill; at least monsters that didn't look like an average human but like something made of teeth that would eat your body instead of just emotions.

So while he couldn't remember having seen this monster before, he was surprisingly less panicked at it.

The Russians had dragged him down along with someone apparently more expendable and revealed their trump card. Billy had gotten to see the pale, almost slimy, flesh and split head of teeth with revulsion. Something in him wouldn't allow his body to panic though. Something in him felt familiar in the things presence.

"You can't keep it in there," he spoke up his thoughts and drew some of his captors attention. "It can get out easy. Just pull the wires and bars right apart, maybe even-"

Billy cut off at the last option, partly because he wasn't sure the split-head monster actually could do that here and partly because he

wasn't sure why he thought of any of those.

Russian words buzzed around his head before a translator asked how he knew that.

"I don't know," he offered his captors a bit of a shrug, "It's just..." The words came as easy as those that told the flimsy cage off; "What's the point of an attack dog if your human fence could be an effective barrier?"

He didn't get fed to the thing that day.

He didn't get fed any of the days proceeding that he was dragged down; days he could look at the new protection plastered up and being built around it. Billy mentally laughed at their efforts, thinking of when he tore past similar barriers with bare arms. Those kinds of thoughts always gave him pause. They made no sense. He was just a human; no matter how much he worked out, he wasn't strong enough to pry gates open. If he was that strong, would he have really stayed around Neil as long as he had? Would he have settled in place when the belt was coming at him right in front of the stepsister he was being forced to live with? The idea was hilariously warped. With the strength he for some reason remembered using, he would have kept his mother safe and with him instead of only settling with what his just-human body could do to snap bones and other feasible feats.

If he had that strength, why would he still be here?

Yet the undoubtedly false memory felt far too real to be a mere dream.

"Why do we continue to do as 24 asks?" asked a lieutenant to the warden of that branch.

"Because, in case you haven't noticed, 024 offers advice that makes sense to follow. We do not want the flower-demon to escape. And, in case you haven't noticed, he offers the advice in a way quite dissociative with his insistence on remembering nothing of importance to us, " the warden answered him, grinding his cigarette in the ashtray by his papers. The young man continued standing straight instead of leaving him to his

work. With a sigh, the warden leaned back from his desk and fixed the other officer with a piercing stare.

"Lieutenant, let me ask: how many others have you ever met that refer to the work of your hands as explicitly 'human' work?"

The lieutenant gave pause. The warden's mouth curved up.

"Exactly. This boy is the key to the creature down below that we were told he would be by Baburin."

The guard that came the most for him had the name Yefim. Yefim seemed young, maybe around his age. He didn't know much else about him. For one, they were still guard and prisoner even if Yefim offered him a small, guilty smile when he would pick him up and avert his pretty dark eyes in shame to the dirty floor. For another, Yefim was Russian and Billy spoke English, not Russian.

That was just a simple truth about the world and the world was currently too confusing for the small truths about reality he had left to be shaken.

Yefim brought him down to the cage below where the other Russians kept him around while they worked and later fed the caged monster.

"Have you ever tried just...leaving...the bodies in there?" Billy spoke up one day as he watched them drag the latest corpse away while the monster seemed sated where it lay on the bloody ground. He said the thought out loud even though he didn't really know why he had even wondered it.

The Russians spoke. One asked about why they would try that *"when it has already killed them and ate until it crawls back satisfied?"*

"I- don't- I just wondered if you had tried it. Being scientists and all. Just 'cause it's full doesn't mean you aren't missing out on seeing how this thing tries to, I don't know, preserve meals? Store them?" he said again, stumbling. He had the vague image of small creatures, sliding around the ground and growing quickly- little larvae that needed bodies to grow inside of. He didn't think closely on the strange

thought that slid uninvited into his mind.

The rest of the people in the room turned to stare at him and began to speak again. The words were just irritating noise, just like the light was just painful; he didn't bother to understand anyone and just let the noise drift.

It was only when Yefim and another less familiar guard grabbed his arms and began to pull him up that his thoughts began to clear slightly from their normal muddled state.

"Did you hear him?" the unknown guard shot over to the one he had caught the name of. *"Guy's got a sick mind."*

"But- aren't we, or at least those giving the commands? Feeding that monster living people?" Yefim replied over Billy's lulling head in perfectly understandable Russian.

It was with a sinking feeling that Billy realized another one of the truths about reality had slipped away again.

"How do you know Russian?" the interrogator's translator asked, "Have you known all along and thought to play with us?"

"No," Billy groaned, "I don't know, ok?"

"How did you understand yesterday then?" the interrogator asked.

"Vasil Kuritsyn," he answered without thinking, "He joined me and the language came with him."

The translator had his mouth open to do his job when Billy spoke over him. The interrogator's eyes widened and he breathed out the name Billy had said.

"Who?" the officer in the back of the room asked and the interrogator turned in his seat to answer the other man.

"The first man we sent through the rift. He was assumed dead after never returning. "

Billy had never met some Russian by the name Vasil who had crawled into an alien world.

So why did he know what he looked like, thought and spoke?

Billy got another look at some of the other prisoners when they were dragged into some large room with tables to eat. Some were Americans. Some were not. Some he recognized; those he recognized often confused him. That policeman from Hawkins? Why was he even here? What was wrong with that crazy place?

There was another american he recognized, even though he had never met the man. The balding white haired one. Billy slid up and walked by the haggard human.

"Thank you," he smiled down predatorily as he drew the man's attention, "for the invitation." Billy's own blood ran as cold as it likely did in the other prisoners'. The words made no sense for him to say, not to someone he had never met before. Maybe he had been referring to the guy being the entire reason he and the rest were being kept prisoner *in Russia* of all crazy places; a threat he never would have worried about had the other american never messed around. Not that he should know that, but it didn't stop him from knowing anyways. That was the reason, he told himself; simply because there was no reason the words would've left his mouth and been said to a complete stranger otherwise.

Yefim dropped him back off at the isolated cell that he had spent who knows how long in. The time he lived in CA and Hawkins felt like a separate world he related to the same way he related to films watched on a screen at a theater. The door didn't shut behind him right away. Yefim had brought his ashamed eyes up and was trying to say something to him.

He was speaking in Russian. The words were clear as day.

отведи меня к нему.

Take me to him.

They were hurting his head. It felt like a hangover, worse than most he had post plastering. The lights hurt worse when Yefim said it.

Everything hurt worse when he heard another voice say those words too- his coworker. The lifeguard. Heather. Where was she? Why was he thinking about her?

What was it he couldn't remember?

The door shut and broke the spell. Yefim was gone; he was...alone? Yes, he was. So how was he expected to bring anyone to *him*?

One day, he could feel that it was time. Today was different. Today he was done being tossed inside a bare cell and being forced to watch others get devoured. Today he was done being a prisoner of Russia for reasons he didn't know.

Two guards took him down to the cell below where he had said things he didn't know the reason for and prolonged his usefulness in his captors eyes. This time there were less down there. They weren't paying as much attention to him. Billy found himself leaning close to the cage, looking down into a face with no eyes as it crawled through its hatch. For the first time, Billy spoke to it.

"It's time. Get up, get out." It only slightly registered that he hadn't said the words out loud. It didn't feel registered that he had said it at all, verbally or no- everything since he had woken up panicking in a Russian medical bay had seemed more like something he was watching through lidded eyes from inside his body.

The face split apart and the creature roared. It threw its large body at the bars and wires meant to keep it out.

He had known the cage was too flimsy to hold it. But it was an attack dog- a scout; it was an animal and it had been handed everything an animal wants in life- free food and the needed ingredients to reproduce. The animal part had no reason to leave when it was given that. The attack dog part just had not heard the order to leave.

The monster was too distracted by blood and panic to pay attention

to him as it fell on the others. Billy moved carefully, trying hard to avoid detection, as he moved towards a downed body and crouched slowly to pry the gun out of the spasming hands.

Then he bolted up the stairs and hoped against hope the monster wouldn't chase him down. After pausing at the top and feeling some of the adrenaline seep away, he found himself laughing maniacally; he had not been pounced on. He had not been killed.

But someone would be.

Billy shot at the locks on the cell doors and discovered he was not entirely practiced with guns but he wasn't awful either. He thanked the time he had spent in CA at shooting ranges; Neil had only been too happy to see him using guns and so he had been allowed to play with ones even as large as this one.

He left the hall of cells behind and could hear the sound of others following. As long as they weren't the bounding steps of a humanoid carnivore, he was perfectly happy with company. All they needed were more weapons and the continued element of panicked surprise and maybe this could work.

The policeman from Hawkins kept looking up at the flickering lights tensely. Billy didn't know why they were flickering down the hall where they marched, but he also couldn't allow himself to care.

He had a job to do.

No, no not a job, where had that come from?- he just had to escape or die trying. Dying was very appealing but Billy felt like he was going crazy and staying here as a Russian captive would only make that worse... had only made that worse. He had never killed anyone before...but no, that was a lie; he had, he had, *he felt he had*. Heather. Heather had been the first- he didn't remember how. He only remembered that he had done something to her and she was gone, gone- like him. Like him. Something turned inside him and the feeling tasted like bile.

They turned a corner and saw some of the soldiers, apparently panicking over the alarm that the creature down below had ripped

through its 'safe' cage and was loose. Billy felt himself smirk the same wide grin he had given people like Harrington after the pretty boy had hit him around or his step sister when she had jerked his car wheel away.

One way or another, something was giving today. After taking advantage of surprise and watching some of the other prisoners raid the weapons from the dead soldiers, Billy turned to stare at the door that would soon be opened to more soldiers and the slim possibility of escape.

"Мы больше не увидимся" he grinned and repeated it, both times too softly for anyone to notice as he spoke to every Russian and monster in the facility. It would either be him or them and at this point in this wild life either option was a win.

The sinking feeling hit him again but even without a memory providing why the cold sensation was happening, Billy knew it was familiar and sank into the comfort that provided.

AN. This has 0 chance of ever happening but was fun to write regardless

Billy was "possessed" throughout but it was the same passive kind as Will's early possession, before all the memories start getting shot and stuff (S2)

Please point out any spelling/grammar error so I can fix it :)

Thank you for your time! Please leave a review :D

(also, question for you readers: I'm really curious as to how the first demogorgon could open little temporary gates and hop in and out to get past barriers- are there any theories as to why/how it could do that and if only that first one could/it only worked with the big gate open? Because if any could do it and the big gate only needs to be open a sliver or not at all, then couldn't the Russian demogorgon just gate out of its cage if it wanted to?)

Мы больше не увидимся means "we won't see eachother again", implying the death of either the speaker, the listener, or both

BTW Trivia time is that originally the Upside Down was going to be called

the Nether, which is why I went with netherland in this

Thank you for your time! Please leave a review :D

3. Turn Up The Heat

In a peaceful Hawkins summer full of romance and breakups and ice cream, a fun game with El takes a horrible turn.

Realizing that the Upside Down is not done with them yet, Max finds herself hoping that what worked on Will just months before will work on the step-brother she's never loved.

Warnings: Major spoilers for season 3 and the previous seasons. Quite a few references to Runaway Max but nothing outright spoilery. Dustin's favorite curse word.

This oneshot is another very AU one- there are no Russians in Hawkins, but presumably they're still messing around in the motherland with their unexplained super laser and opening a crack of a gate there. Because there isn't a Russian presence in Hawkins, Dustin and Steve aren't trying to stop the spies with Robin and Erica, and Hopper and Joyce aren't busy running around with Murray and Alexei in an attempt to get away from Russian Schwarzenegger and fix Joyce's magnets- BUT there is still the part of the Mindflayer separated from Will running around and presumably making its act because of the activity over in Russia.

Max Mayfield didn't like to be in denial. Her mom spent so much time there; always looking past the obvious, always trying to see people and events as something they weren't. Susan had known who Neil was before she had agreed to marry him; she'd known the things that her stepdad had kept hidden from Max until after the deed was done- and Susan went along with it all anyways because she lived in denial and dreamt they would all be a happy family that loved each other and stayed away from the lifestyle of her ex.

Max really got annoyed over that aspect of her mom. The aspect that tried so hard not to see Max for what she was, but what a nice, clean, feminine girl she could be. In keeping with the traditional pastime of a teenager, Max spent time and effort into not being her mother; for her, that rebellion meant taking the world for what it was and avoiding denying it for a happy fantasy.

She also didn't really have any reason to care about Billy. Sure, there were moments where she thought he was cool and laughed at something he said; moments far outnumbered by the times he made her cry or pissed or overall distressed. Those moments that sounded like breaking bones and crackling fires and laughing madness overlaying punches.

So why did the idea of him being a plaything for the monster her friends had all dubbed the 'Mindflayer' distress her so much? Why did the thought of never seeing him strolling around the public pool like he owned the place, in a sense of calm she never saw him with at home with Neil, make her insides twist? Why did the thought of him dying, being killed by someone she trusted and cared about, send her into denial over what El seemed so certain about?

It was hard to continue being in denial when she'd seen everything to confirm the sick guess.

A new moment had entered her mental categories on her step-brother; this moment didn't fit into those that were almost enjoyable nor did it fit with those that made her sick and scared to remember. This was in a section of its own and it was a category Max wished she had never been made privy to.

The sounds of Billy crying, screeching threats and then the begging pleas for her, *her*, to understand that *he didn't mean to, didn't want to, that it wasn't him*- the closest time she had ever heard her step-brother seem close to apologizing, actually fearing or caring for someone other than himself, and, worst of all, giving a damn about her and her opinion.

The pleas in the sauna, mixed with the sight of him covered in dangerous black inhuman marks and using a strength he shouldn't have, had killed any chance for denial about it all.

Max Mayfield didn't know what she wanted. She didn't want Billy in her life; didn't want him in her friends life, didn't want him and his girl of the day being in her house, didn't want the noises of hits and blows dealt from father to son to reach her ears again, didn't want his pressure to be molded into her worst, most chaotic parts. But she knew from the moment El had first began to look into him with

worry over something Upside Down related being present that she didn't want Billy out of her life; she didn't want him dead, didn't want her friends to be the ones to kill him and definitely didn't want some monster to be puppeteering him until his use grew thin and he was killed as an aside thought. There didn't seem to be any option in between the two contradictions but Max overwhelmingly knew she hated Billy far too much, and still felt their twisted version of a familiar bond in reach, to want him dead.

Mrs. Byers was jittery. It was a shame, in Max's opinion. The little woman (the redhead teen was as tall as her now, to her amusement) had been so much more calm, happy, and, dare she say it, sane as of late. She'd been doing better and then her store began the stages of bankruptcy that sent her into more of her usual trademark stress; but her recent dates with Hopper seemed to be getting both of them a little more out of the unhappy shells they had been in after the events with the Mindflayer back over Halloween time. That mood was broken the moment the two single parents had walked in on them trying to bandage up and in various states of distress after the disaster of a sauna test. The truth had come out soon after. Max didn't try to keep any of them from saying anything; she hadn't ever been good at lying or covering anything up while in panic anyways.

The situation was bad. Mrs. Byers looked both haunted and on edge. Neither kept her from talking or stating quite plainly that they were going to fix this. They all would do what they did with Will months before-

"-Just cook the bastard out of him-"

The snarl on the kind lady's face seemed out of place; but, considering everything, she had many reasons to hate the monster that went around possessing people.

"Hey."

The soft voice had Jonathan bring his head up from what he was working on to look at the doorway. His little brother edged in; not nearly as little as he was just months before. Now, when Will took a

seat next to him, they were almost the same height.

"Hey," Jonathan said right back, smiling at his brother and holding his eye contact longer than he held with most other people (that didn't have the name Nancy, Mom, or any of his few friends). "How have you been holding up?"

The adam's apple bobbing in Will's throat betrayed how he swallowed before speaking, "Alright. I mean...I did...I tore up Castle Byers. And-"

Jonathan put an arm around his little brothers shoulder and listened. He was good at listening. Good at observing. When it came to comfort, he did his best. But not every hurt could be fixed by a new mix-tape and clinging hugs.

"Will," he eventually spoke up softly, "How have you been holding up with what was happening out there? With the sauna."

Dark eyes looked into him helplessly before they stared aimlessly at the wall.

"I-I can feel him. I know when he's near or doing something big- I wish... I wish I hadn't missed it. That I told someone about this feeling before instead of trying to just ignore it but-but I didn't want to be tied down by him again," Will answered and looked at him again, "I didn't want my life to always have to feel him. I just wanted to move on and-and who knows how many people have been hurt because I've been ignoring what I should have been warning you and mom and everyone about?"

Not for the first time, and likely not for the last, Jonathan felt that his brother had been through far too much and wished he could leave it all behind while darkly understanding that would not happen. There was no wonder their mom wanted them to move from Hawkins outside of just not making the money at her store to keep the house. Whether that move could truly get his little brother away from the presence of the creature that had terrorized and possessed him, Jonathan doubted, but it felt worth it to try and get some distance from the pain even with the pain such a move would cause him and his family both.

Dustin sped into the ice cream shop he frequently visited and grabbed Steve's arm without a second thought.

"Wh-hey!" the adult started, already finding himself being dragged along to the door that led to the back room. The non-existent line for ice cream helped convince Steve to just go along with it and get the door opened for them both.

"Steve! Steve!" Dustin started as soon as they were both in the back room.

"Yeah?" the adult slid into a seat across from where Dustin was sitting energetically at the little table back there. The urgency on the young teens face was both alarming and also familiar; the same sort of expression he had plastered on while tossing Steve's apology flowers away and saying that his extra-dimensional monster "pet" Dart had eaten his cat and needed to be dealt with.

"So, El and Max were messing around and things went out of control and they brought Will into it because he knows the most and so of course Mrs. Byers also got dragged in and where she goes the chief follows and-"

"Hey," Steve threw a hand out to slow him down, "Can you be a bit more clear?"

Dustin took a deep breath and then stated as rapidly as he usually let things that he was nervous about slip out, "We're pretty sure Billy's possessed by the Mindflayer."

When he got no immediate vocal response, the curly haired boy prodded: "Like Will? In the fall?"

"Wait, wait- Billy?" Steve asked, bewildered. "Billy Hargrove? The douche that went psycho on us in the Byers house? That Billy?"

Dustin nodded and opened his mouth like he was going to say more but Steve went on, "And the big shadow thing?" He gestured above himself for emphasis. "The one that made the tunnels and demodogs and destroyed the department of energy? How is it back when El

closed the gate?"

"No clue," Dustin shook his head, wide eyed, "But we're all in deep shit now. We can't have anyone running around possessed by the Mindflayer or who knows what it could do. Nancy and Will's brother already are worried over some weird stuff they've been seeing in their job with rats and old ladies and-"

He cut off mid head shake and stared towards the door. Steve's head followed to find Robin leaning against the wall with what was probably an amused, but also seemingly concerned, facial expression.

"This is all part of your games, right?"

"Awww shit," Dustin mumbled down at the table.

"You all keep away, you hear me?" Hopper said in his familiar commanding orders. Having the kids around was not his first choice; but El had pointed out they needed her, Will had a special connection that could possibly keep them from danger and Max refused to stay behind. Lucas, in turn, refused to separate from the redhead. At that point, the rest of the kids were coming whether the adults wanted them to or not.

Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy had been the 'experts', or the only ones with any experience, on actually getting the Mindflayer out of a victim. They could only hope it would work a second time. Their other hope was that with El and Hopper, keeping Billy drugged and restrained wouldn't be a futile effort. Will had been strong enough when possessed; Hargrove was a nightmare.

The three of them had set up and then joined the rest. The rest included a far larger amount than Max was expecting when all this started. Not only was the 'party' joined by the chief and some family members, Steve Harrington (looking disgruntled and uncomfortable about what was happening) had also arrived with Dustin and with them was someone who looked and acted very out of place. Dustin swore it was because she had heard too much that she was there. Max sympathized with the new young adult; she remembered very vividly what it was like to discover there were other-dimensional

monsters in the world. Life just couldn't go back after that.

"Bait," El replied simply. She was a target and she knew it; she also knew that the Mindflyer wouldn't be stupid enough to run into a trap unless it did have suitable bait.

Hopper ran a hand down his face.

"I know, I know," he muttered before slipping to catch the small psychics hand, "Be safe though, you hear? Keep safe."

The trap sprung nicely. And that was terrifying because the trap involved being in the same house as Billy while his form was covered in a black that didn't belong and he slunk about with more menace than she had never seen on him before. That, in and of itself, was frightening enough.

The setting was her house because they didn't have time to decide a better setting and it hadn't been hard to get Susan to call him over for a family dinner and then evacuate under the orders of the Chief of Hawkins Police. Normal Billy would have said something rude and not showed up. He was very independent after getting a job he seemed to enjoy and moving away from his father. Not living under Neil's roof seemed to ease some of the crazy out of him and the times Max had seen him around and about he had almost acted like a normal person instead of a tightly strung wire for an explosive. Possessed Billy agreed readily because, as El explained, it was an easy way to come into a house and take the members away. Both Nancy and Jonathan had collaborated on this idea by discussing that the lifeguard who El and Max had gone to the home of had a father that had melted into a monster when killed; unlikely anything but the Mindflyer's doing. From there they had guessed that the 'flayed', as they had been dubbed by the nerds of the group, spread while staying under the radar- the two's old boss because of his daughter and his daughter because of her coworker. Luring Billy, or the monster in control that is, to a house would be agreeable to him because it could mean easy, non suspicious access to more victims.

Unfortunately, Billy had gotten a look at her when she was peeking out of her doorway and the monster had decided to drop its cover,

easily suspecting that if the sister from the sauna test was still around the house than there was no reason to stay hidden in normality. There went the element of surprise, but it made the trap easier to spring if he went into this room anyways.

Max pushed the others back behind the wall as he prowled. In the failing lighting that for some reason seemed to follow any monstrous activity, it was hard to focus on the black veins that distorted her step-brothers body.

She whipped back to join them and gestured frantically while mouthing silent words in an attempt to warn them he was approaching. The flickering lights and being shoved back into hiding seemed to have warned them already.

The enhanced body moved by and saw the lot of them. All of them fled backwards towards the bathroom end of the room. A sudden jolt of pain livened down Max's back and she felt herself crashing across the floor. She tried hard to move to her feet again but the hit had *hurt*. Through hazy vision she saw her step-brothers form try for her friends before the bulky figure of the chief of police was on him. Even Hopper was easily tossed aside by the inhuman strength, but combined with El, sheer numbers, and a good number of tranquilizers, the fight was not completely uneven.

Max crawled to El when the other girl slumped down exhausted and held her as tight as her still dazed body could. Besides her, Lucas fell to the ground and hugged her. Between the boy's comforting gesture and the little relieved smile El threw up at her, Max felt herself sob and fill with optimism she hadn't been hoping for when this entire disaster had begun. Everything had felt dismal and no-win since the day of the sauna test; now, because of her friends, her family, she felt her body relax with the new hope the victory had offered up to her.

A week later saw the mutli-generational gang, forged by supernatural horror, outside an abandoned steel mill. In every hand was some kind of weapon, many fire related. Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler both held gasoline jugs with schooled faces of determination; both were standing near where Steven Harrington was spinning his nailed up baseball bat. Joyce Byers had an axe, for what good it would do;

she wore the same expression that seemed to be haunting her since she had discovered someone else had been put into the state her son had in the fall. The Chief of Police stood by his adopted daughter with a shotgun in his hands and a lighter in a pocket. Eleven herself needed no weapon in her hands but stood at the front with steely resolve. And somewhere in that group of twelve, a redhead girl held onto fireworks that she wanted nothing more than to throw at the creature hiding somewhere below them now and give it a taste of the fiery hell they'd be sending it to that day.

AN- This runs on the presumption that Will's possession and the S3 flayings hold almost the same mechanics

Even as the ending implies they got Billy free enough for him to tell them where the Mindflayer is building I can't imagine drinking bleach/ammonia wouldn't land you in the hospital (actually that's rather optimistic) So I can't see him joining them at the mill battle

As always, please tell me what you think! This is the most attention I've received for the rather casual fanfics I only started doing this year and it's really encouraging to see those faves and reviews :D It helps me to post these sooner and with more enthusiasm to see that they're being enjoyed.

4. Proverbial Skeletons, Proverbial Closets

Warnings: Major spoilers for season 2 and 3. Brief language and an attempted affair

As it turns out, season 2 Billy is much harder to write than season 3 Billy.

I haven't read any 'Billy looks in the fridge and finds out AUs' although I know there are a lot out there. So please alert me if there is any blatant plagiarism in here and give me some grace that it was unintentional.

Every family has a skeleton in their closet. That's how the expression goes, right? Well, Billy had no problem believing it. He could guess with smug assuredness that every family did even if they were in this stupid isolated town. The Wheelers? A picture perfect family? Definitely.

The Byers? The weirdo family? With the rumors circling around them, he wouldn't have been surprised by a literal skeleton in a closet at their dump house. Getting a good, uninterrupted look at the house just helped those rumors along. There were papers scratched with crayons taped together and crawling all over; no sane person did that to their own house. It certainly wasn't a nice sight to wake up to. His head was pulsing as he groaned from his place on the ground. The drug that *Max* had forced into him was finally wearing off and Billy wasn't sure if he wanted to be awake in the place he was. The house was too quiet and empty and full of taped together pictures and the mess left behind from the fight. The fight had left him achy and the drugs weren't helping with the headache. His keys were gone and a look outside revealed *his car* was too. He needed something to drink.

The sink was too tepid; he wanted something cold- first water and then it didn't matter what came next. Moving from the sink to the fridge, he ripped the door open to grab whatever water would be inside and then hightail it out of there.

Nothing could have prepared him for what dropped to the ground with a soft thump.

It was supposed to be that every family had a skeleton in their closet. The Byers family had a monster in their fridge.

Sure, he watched the news and found some answers. The chemical leak, the cover up, the closure. Chemicals killing some girl wasn't unlikely at all. Chemicals creating mutant dogs monsters? Chemicals that caused whatever originally preceded the monster, a dog or lizard or whatever, to lose its facial features in exchange for a four way split face of teeth? That was harder for him to believe. Billy had seen it in the fridge; if he didn't still have the image seared in his mind, he would assume it had never been real. There were answers out there. He just had to find them.

He found them. More of them. Not answers. Monsters. They were being stacked up, disposed of. Billy wasn't sure what had happened to the one he had found. It wasn't like he had returned to the Byers house or anything.

As the trucks moved to and fro, Billy saw familiar red hair and turned cold inside. Fury mixed with confusion.

Max was with her friends and, as weird as it was, Harrington. This time 'king Steve' was joined by Jonathan Byers. He shouldn't have been that surprised to find out the creep was in on all this; the dog thing had been in his fridge after all.

The group was carted down a dirt road to some farm and by the time Billy had caught up in person, ready to confront them all and demand answers, they were surrounding some hole in the ruined pumpkin patch. A batch of shovels and other tools lay on the ground by them.

"This is where you went down?" Billy barely could catch Byers' quiet question as he caught up. Instead of barging out as he had originally planned, he stayed still and watched.

"Went down, came up," one of the kids answered, "It's where Hop and your mom and-um...and Bob...went down too."

"We've got the map packed with our gear over there, in case we want to go down and dig around for more demodog bodies or Upside

Down stuff," Sinclair gestured at the pile of tools. As seemed rather characteristic of Byers, the teen didn't really answer. The other teen poked at the ground with his foot, causing dirt to fall down the incline. He glanced over at the kid with the headset microphone strapped on.

"Want to go down below?" Harrington pointed towards the hole, "More 'scientific breakthroughs' to be found?"

"No, man," the curly haired kid grumbled, "I don't really want to go see his body."

Harrington just shrugged, as if discussing someone's body was normal for a middle schooler, and picked up a shovel. From his spot of observation, Billy watched the group cover the hole in the ground. He never moved in.

Answers may be stranger than everything he had seen so far and that was already world shaking enough. There was a distinct feeling of wrongness and intrusion that locked him out of approaching the group that acted and spoke like they knew exactly what they were doing and dealing with. It was a barrier almost as effective as death or half a country's distance.

Just because Neil and Susan were back more times than not didn't mean he wasn't trapped with his step sister. Just because Max had a skateboard and knew how to use it didn't mean he wasn't forced to drive her around.

Drives before were awkward, annoying, and overall awful for all involved- even if exerting authority and power over Max was always cathartic. Now, they were still that but mixed with unease: because 1 she had threatened him with that spiked bat and he remembered that pretty vividly for someone on sedatives at the time, and 2 she knew and was heavily involved in something very strange, unearthly, and no doubt dangerous- and he? He wasn't in that loop and never would be.

Max liked to slam the door of the car she had stolen at one time, the night his life changed. She liked to slump in her seat and offer the

occasional glance or attempt at conversation before staring out the window, ignoring him. Drives were the only time he had her cornered and in a position where Neil or Susan or anyone else could not hear him; as such, he always desired to demand answers during them but never did.

As usual, Max placed her skateboard in the car before sliding in herself and slamming the door. Today, the bags under her eyes were more pronounced than usual. Billy did as he did every day since the beginning of November, every day for over a month- ignored the unease and curiosity. Tried to at least.

"So," he broke the silence after a while biting down on his lip and wishing for a cigarette. "The Wheelers, right? To hang out with your friend 'Jane'? That what you told Neil? Where'm I really taking you?"

Max didn't look out the window as she answered, but not in the same fear she used to avoid his gaze. Instead of anxiety, she just didn't seem to care enough to look his way.

"We're meeting at the Sinclairs. Drop me off there."

Familiar anger rose inexplicably. Neil would kill him if he knew where Billy was dropping his 'sister' off; but Neil wasn't here and wasn't going to find out.

The car continued cruising on down damp crappy roads. He ended up reaching for a cigarette and letting both hands off the wheel to prep it before taking a deep inhale and exhaling the smoke into the car.

"You ever been over to the quarry?" Billy ended the silence again. "Not a bad place. The high schoolers around here like to go and mess around. You'd like it." Actually, even Susan would get violently vengeful towards him if he brought Max to that place. But that was what every push was for, wasn't it? To press the limits of those around him. Press the law. Press the human body. Press Neil as far as he could in the chance he'd get almost an inch. Live on the same kind of metaphorical ledges that the quarry had lining a deadly drop.

Max hummed in response. Looking her way and exhaling a puff of smoke her direction, Billy could see she looked a bit surprised. Likely

at the fact that this time he was starting the pointless small talk he always forced her to cut off. He didn't give a shit about her and she didn't him, after all.

The corner of her mouth lifted in disgust at the smoke and she waved it away before looking steadfastly out her passenger side window. Billy reached for another camel and tossed it in her lap.

"You look like shit, Max. Want a drag?"

That earned an incredulous glare. He felt himself grin. Deja vu; she was so easy to push and pull. That was how he had gotten her to take her first drag on a cigarette after all, wasn't it? Easily manipulated. Easily ordered. Easy to cow. She was a fiery kid and it wasn't necessarily *fun* but it was *something* to watch her mold into something that resembled him.

"Not happening again," Max pushed the camel off her seat.

"Aww, why? It'd take the edge off."

Her face twisted at his mocking.

"Too dangerous for you?" Billy mocked further.

"Yeah," Max just said dully, "Too dangerous."

"Right up your alley then, isn't it?"

The speedometer moved higher and higher as they slid onto one of the roads that just went straight on without a turn until the suburban areas of the sad excuse for a town began. The redhead ignored him, at least vocally. He could still see her shifting in her seat.

"Isn't that why you have the friends you do? Like the adrenaline rush, don't you."

"We're just normal people," she replied, "You might not know from experience, but we get our kicks doing perfectly normal things like the arcade *so leave us alone.*"

The weather was very similar to the drab day he had driven over to

the Byers house ready to break someone and drag Max away when she learned her lesson, only to learn instead of something he never desired or expected. It made him want even more to press while he had this chance. No more beating around the bush. No more looking at the redhead over the dinner table at 'family meals' enforced by Neil and wondering what it was she knew.

"Oh?" Billy raised an eyebrow and grinned again, the change from his thoughtful frown neurotically fast.

She looked uncomfortable, almost like she used to on average.

"Yeah. Just normal stuff that doesn't get any of us hurt. So don't worry about yourself driving me home with some unexplained medical problem because Lucas' family would never allow that to happen."

"And? So what? Like you've never done anything dangerous?" he sneered widely directly at her instead of staring at the road ahead. Max's gaze flickered back and forth him, the road and the door; as if she could just get out while he was driving, he laughed silently.

"Would you stop?" she hissed back at him. The veneer strength she had put on since threatening him at the crazy house seemed to slip almost into the old attitude she would have while he drove.

Billy didn't vocally press her but his continued nonchalance about driving and still open mouth had her press instead.

"You aren't going to make me into you! It's not gonna happen," Max declared, "And don't you dare keep insinuating that my friends are dangerous! Lucas isn't anywhere near the danger that you are, so stop acting like he is *or that you care*."

The laugh that ripped forth was familiarly lacking in mirth.

"Riiight," Billy drew out, "Right. King Steve protects you all, all you *middle schoolers* that hang out with the *adult*. Protects you from the big, bad monsters out there."

"I know you, Billy. You don't care if I'm safe or happy. But you want me to smoke, to hate, to turn out into the controlling freak you are or

get in trouble for trying. Mom isn't the only one that knows your game when you try to offer me cigarettes. Just leave me and my friends alone."

Her strong, angry lecture was still being delivered by her and she was still young and weak; the threats or strength were undermined by the cracking in her voice by the end.

Max's eyes seemed soft and watery, like she was going to start letting tears slip out (a common enough occurrence in his vehicle). Then the steely gaze was back again instantly.

"You will. I spoke your family's language and you understood it. My friends and I aren't in danger away from you."

"My face isn't a mass of teeth!" he roared back at her, turning to face her yet again as the car continued forward. His step-sisters face lost all color.

"Yeah," Billy barked a laugh and looked ahead again, "Yeah. Cigarettes are gonna make you drop dead from one inhale but the freak mutant dogs with the split heads are perfectly safe. Huh? I'm sure they're just such great pets, just like Harrington is just such a good babysitter for all you, keeping you out of trouble and danger."

Max gave no response. She was still sitting motionless with a face frozen.

"Or maybe they taste good. Probably why they get stuffed in fridges and drool all over the 'sanitary' sides. You all go out and snack on monsters, is that it?"

Her silence was only amusing for a moment. Then the desire to know what the hell was going on consumed him like it had since November's start.

"ANSWER ME!"

Of course she flinched back from his roar. She always flinched back. She should. She should.

"No! No, you don't get to do that anymore!" Max shouted right back.

Emotions were rolling, tumbling, inside- devouring him.

"Go-" she swallowed quietly and looked out her window at the drab rain. "-Go to the chiefs place. Not the other cops. Just Chief Hopper. Drive us there instead. I can walk to Lucas's later."

"Cops?" Billy sneered, "Why would I?"

"Because then you can tell him what you've seen! How much you know!" The steel was still there. It was always there. So was fear and grief, but his stepsister was fiery. There was so, so much potential in there to mold around; and all of it continued to tell Billy to shove off from doing so.

"*Know of what?* What the hell has been going on? Tell me Max or I swear to-"

"Shut up. Don't you dare threaten me. You want to know what's been happening? *Do what I said to do.*"

The kid had grown such balls since threatening to pulp his.

Summer arrived in Hawkins in all its hot glory, which was completely put to shame by Billy's memory of California's summer weather. There was no comparing it to the days of salty breezes, waves and high school gangs, but it was a welcome change. Billy knew he could probably out swim any of the people in Indiana and the water was a welcome change to the cold and dreary last few months. The rest of the lifeguards were mainly college age, like himself, and very good looking, like himself. The pool mainly attracted the attention of kids but there were still plenty of older guys and girls that were in very fine shape that was only more pronounced by wearing swimsuits. One of whom was Mrs. Wheeler.

Seducing the much older woman was easy but not too easy; it required class and smooth moves and the right words until he was confident that his practiced conversation in the car was not in vain.

Confidence can always end up being misplaced.

Sure, it wasn't Wheeler's fault that nothing happened. It wasn't that

he got to the motel and she never showed and all his practiced words in the car were for naught. It was that he never made it to the motel.

Billy struggled out of his car to investigate his windshield. The night felt suddenly so much more constricting than it had as he cruised down the road. He could swear he heard noises in the bushes and brush. Making it to the front of his car, Billy dipped a few fingers in the awful substance coating his windshield near the break. Pain spiked in his chest as he looked over the slime on his fingers; something was very, very wrong. The noises, the crash, the slime. His memories shot to the slime coating the inside of an empty fridge left behind by what was quite literally a monster. The descriptions given to him by the chief and the kids Max hung out with and the psychic girl, who wouldn't let him disbelieve a word they said even as he had stomped away and acted like the conversation never happened, came right after that first memory. Questions on what could have done this to his car hadn't left.

It steamed. It was sticky and yet stringy. There were sounds in the woods around him. Maybe it was a totally explainable accident. But maybe it was related to Hawkins skeleton in the closet. And that wasn't a chance he was going to take by sticking around.

Billy hit the road and sprinted down it in the direction of the town as fast as he could.

AN Cue every for want of nail outcome that would ensue if Billy was not the first of the flayed (Heather wouldn't be second, her parents wouldn't have been flayed because of her so Nancy and Jonathan wouldn't have been attacked by their boss in the hospital, etc)

The references to Billy convincing Max to try a cigarette and leading to her getting in trouble with Susan comes from Runaway Max

As a side note, Dustin will go on to believe Dart is in happy chocolate heaven. Mews is in happy cat heaven and it's twice as good as unlimited candy, because Mews matters more and deserved better than to be eaten in the safe house that should have been a haven and home for many more kitty years.

5. For A Few Moments More

It was too late. Joyce understood that and, agonizing as it was, turned the keys and watched him fade.

Far upstairs, the connection between the Mindflyer and its puppets is cut off as Billy Hargrove is offering Eleven to the vengeful monster.

Warnings: Major spoilers for season 3 and the previous seasons. Minor language, mentions of violence and death but this is probably the tamest one in terms of content

The wave. The wave had to have been seven feet tall. Taller than him. Taller than his mom. She was a tall woman. She carried herself in a tall way. Out here at least. In their house she was hunched. Hunched made for better protection.

She was gone in their house. She left him. But not yet. Not while he ran back from the sea all wet and excited and proud. Pride reflecting in her eyes.

The wave again. Riding it. Being in touch with his body in a way his dad's enforced sports never let him be. He could be experiencing those; could be seeing Neil. But he didn't have to. So he didn't. He rode the wave instead. He felt the breeze and water. Watched the seagulls and CA shore that was so unlike Hawkins. Saw his mom as she spun. Saw her just like he had when he first experienced this.

All at once he wasn't there. All at once he was in pain, in agony. His mind was ripping apart and he screamed from the feeling. Claws that were wrapped up in his brain were torn free and the pain could have killed him right there right then- but didn't.

The one kindness the Monster had given him was the memories. He stayed in them some of the time; relieved them, even the bad ones until he found a way to just stay on the beach. But that was gone- the memories and the invasive creature. The split, the separation from *one and all* almost had him die on the floor of the ruined Starcourt

Mall. But he and his fiery step-sister were more similar than either cared to be; she fought and so did he. Fought long enough for sedatives to eventually be injected and sweet oblivion overcame the agony.

The hospital was a miserable experience. Billy was forced to stay there as a scientist called Owens tried to explain the mental deterioration that they were making sure he was recovering from, the various stresses to his body that doing inhuman feats like holding automatic gates apart had caused, the internal damage from the bleach the Monster had forced him to drink before it seemed to decide that out of all its victims it wanted him to stay as he was.

Max visited. He couldn't help but feel she shouldn't. They hadn't interacted much since he moved out and it had been for the better. The few interactions they had were less aggressive than usual. Their dynamic had changed after that day in the Byers house where she had done just what he would do, just what his dad would do, and threatened him; threats were something he could understand from her far more than pleas and he listened to what she commanded. During the summer when they would cross paths there wasn't that rage underneath anymore. The pent up aggression and control he took out on her wasn't there anymore once he moved away from Neil Hargrove and got his own control over his life. They had become almost civil. Not loving. Billy hadn't loved a human for over a decade. Max likely couldn't love him after the almost half a decade they had spent together. But they could be their own person even in each others company. When she and her friends went to the pool, she grinned and laughed with them and didn't chill in fear whenever she'd stare his way. He wouldn't stop what he was doing or feeling just because he saw her.

Without Neil, Billy felt like he was seeing through a very different veil whenever he glanced at his stepsister.

What he said in the sauna was raw. It was fear, it was truth, it was desperate. He needed her to know- he *needed* her to know he wasn't a killer. It was so important in that moment that he broke through to tell her so (although he had a feeling the Monster was weak enough to let him speak in that heat so his breakthrough was nothing

impressive. It wasn't when he really needed to break free. That he had not done). He didn't love his step-sister but for some inexplicable reason he had to make sure she knew. Her unwanted brother was an aggressive sadist but he wasn't really a murderer, wasn't the monster he had been close to becoming in the fall after the move- she had to hear that. He wasn't sure why.

He wasn't sure why she visited him. He had failed. His body had killed or contributed to the deaths of over a dozen people of Hawkins. It had hit her and her friends and lay the body of her best friend, the strange psychic girl named after a number, down in sacrifice to an abomination. And through it all he had never stopped it. Never won against the mental control.

But she did visit. It was a very weird experience. They didn't talk much back and forth, although Max tended to tell plenty of stories that caught him up on everything he had never known about her, her friends and Hawkins. They spat their fair share of insults. They shared the same number of silent moments. Moments where Max's hand would sit next to his on the bed. Would look down at him with an emotion that for the life of him he could not read. Maybe whatever desperate need for her to understand that he wasn't killing out of his own will was reflected in her desperate gazes that weren't quite pity.

At some point all of what Max called, for whatever reasons, 'the party' came to see him. The Byers family seemed the most genuinely upset over him, with Mrs. Byers unable to hold too much of a conversation without starting to look like she was going to break or become enraged (mostly when the topic of the Monster came up). Little Byers offered some insightful comments and somewhat helpful advice on dealing with the trauma left behind by the otherworldly creature. Jonathan Byers was quiet but did manage to break past his anti-social muteness to ask him if he liked music and what types he liked. The teen came and visited once on his own to drop off a mixtape for the hospital rooms music player. He left almost right after and Billy, at a loss for anything to do, started it up only to discover it only included songs he had said he liked. Will and Mrs. Byers came with Max once and offered a strange play at group

therapy that was definitely not successful but a nice thought regardless. Billy felt oddly touched with the gifts all of them had left. He couldn't understand how they figured he deserved it after what he had done; even with what Will said about how nothing that he did while possessed was his fault, the kid had still apparently communicated at various moments to his family and friends through that possession. Harrington had looked very uncomfortable when he had dropped in with Henderson and some chick he hadn't met named Robin, and both boys apologized for not trying harder to keep the flesh monster away from him in the mall. He had quickly pointed out that he had almost run a bunch of them over and owed Harrington for not doing so. Robin had acted so out of the loop that Billy actually enjoyed her company; she shared none of the awkward fear or anger that the others still exuded towards him simply because she had never once interacted with him in her life and didn't seem to know the type of person he was.

Once, after a morning of sickness and unpleasant hurling, Max came in with her mom. Billy hated Susan but he also didn't. She didn't deserve the sort of ire he had put on her for years; it wasn't the redheads fault that his own mom was forever gone. The disgusting pity she would look at him with was a stupid reason for rage- or so he had decided after the world changing events of terror over the fourth of July week. Susan gave him a few presents and soft glances and words. When she left, he choked out a "sorry Susan", apologies for *everything* and meant for *everyone* but unheard by them, that was far more authentic than any Neil had forced from him and earned a shushing noise from the little woman.

His father never visited.

Another time, when he was already crawling out of his skin to get out of the hospital and, if possible, far away from Hawkins, Billy got a glance at Sinclair as Max came in. The boy looked away from him as soon as he caught his eye and the door shut, blocking any view of the kid. He didn't respond to Max's questions as he stared past the door. The memory of him pushing the kid against a cabinet, ready to hurt, came to mind. No excuses he wanted to give (that he was angry. That he wasn't himself. That Neil had pushed him over the edge of sanity that night into aggressive psychosis.) felt like they held weight in

light of the possession that had literally left him helpless to whatever attacks his body committed.

"Max," he interrupted the girls latest ramble and earned himself full attention. Billy gestured his head towards the door. "The Sinclair kid. He alright? Did any of you kids get hurt in that fight?"

Her expression matched an animal trapped in the headlights. It shifted from defensive and yet friendly in confusing ways.

"We were all ok. El got real hurt in the leg and she can't do much with her powers anymore," all of which the redhead had explained to him over the days as well as what had seemingly happened to them all, "But her leg is alright now. She's staying with the Byers' and the Wheelers' at the moment because she doesn't want to be at Hopper's house with him gone." It was surreal to hear her talk about the former chief of police in such a familiar way, or of her friends when before the incident they had never once discussed her social life in a civil manner.

"Good," he replied, at a loss for words because he really wasn't sure how to talk about this regret overflowing inside him. "That's good."

They went quiet until Max started talking once again about some band she and Dustin Henderson and Mike Wheeler liked that her other friends didn't.

"Could I-" Billy interrupted her minutes later, "Do you think I could talk to him?"

Max looked skeptical. It took effort to try and even explain what he meant and *why*. But it was worth it. Because by the end, not only did she promise to ask her boyfriend if he was willing to converse with Billy but she also beamed down at him with something that had to be affection. And Billy didn't feel like wilting in the distress and guilt left over by the Monster when she did.

He went to the pool after it was closed for the day. It was locked up but that wasn't much of an obstacle. There hadn't been any official resignation submitted to his coworkers and boss, and Billy had no

wish to talk to any of them about why he and his fellow lifeguard had missed shifts. Going in the daytime would have led to those sort of questions so he chose to visit at night. At night, when there was no glaring sunlight. Would it still burn? Even if it didn't, Billy had a feeling he would remember that feeling. Like what people without limbs talked about; he remembered a guy in CA, Dixon, who was missing part of his arm after a gang fight gone wrong calling it phantom pain. If Billy were to sit up in the tall lifeguard perch and let his arm move out of the shade of the umbrella it would remember how the sun felt, how the blackened veins moved outward visibly in a defense mechanism, how the alien pain *burned* ...

The pool area was too still at night. When he worked here, it would always be alive and wild with childish energy. They would splash and jump and get yelled at by him; it was a very fun job. It really was. It put him near or in the water and water had always been his favorite place. A pool was no ocean but in Hawkins it was close enough. When he was as young as the kids who enjoyed messing in the water, his mom would take him down to the beach and let him surf. Back then he had thought that surfing was what he would be devoting his life to. Watching kids swim around as he watched (or flirted or strutted instead of sitting up at the seat) was certainly more enjoyable than any of the 'fun' he had during high school.

Graduating was finding a new freedom- a new life. It really was a new life. Like everything before was part of a dream or someone else's life and just so completely derealized from what he now was. Graduating meant being able to get away from high school- away from the limitations of a high schooler and embracing the life of an adult, away from high schoolers, away from driving his step sister to school. The old Hargrove house where all he had was his room and even that wasn't truly *his* but his father's was left behind and replaced by a new, much smaller but *his*, house. To support the house he had taken a loan out to rent, Billy got a full-time job; a job he actually really enjoyed. High schoolers made awful company but his fellow college age lifeguards weren't bad. The mixture of new company, a house of his own, a job he liked, and being away from Neil and the two Mayfields' had given him a different slate on life.

Now he looked at the water kids would be playing in the next day

and he couldn't think of being there to look over all that noise or see the spaces left from the children that had been dragged into Hawkins monstrous secret and left no body to bury.

Now he looked at the seats and remembered the older ladies of Hawkins who would sit in them and openly lust, and he could only think of the seat that Tori Myati would never sit in again because her body had melted in on itself, or about how Karen Wheeler was the reason he was in this sad state now (not quite, not quite, the blame was on them not her, on him not someone else, but thinking of what happened at the mill as being his fault was incomprehensible right now this late at night).

Now he looked over at the showers and break room that the other lifeguards used and realized he could never enter them again. Not with the memories.

Not with what he could remember. This job was one he genuinely found himself enjoying. And he could never bring himself to come to this pool for work again.

A set of headlights flashed over the dark grounds of the pool and parked somewhere behind the main building. From where Billy was crouching by the pools edge, he couldn't tell who had arrived. A door slammed shut; the noise was stark in the empty night. He stood up in the cold night air and saw the exact moment the flashlight beam moved through the fence onto him. Bright yellow was all he could see of his visitor but the voice that spoke up revealed it to be Jonathan Byers that stood outside the locked down pool.

"Hey," the other man called out in a somehow soft way, "Do you need a ride?"

Right. Because his car was ruined. Ruined. Burned and crushed and gone- a waste of countless hours put into perfecting one of the only things he could own instead of being 'lent' to him by Neil. He had walked to the pool instead; the woods would have felt like monsters were ready to jump on him if it wasn't so easy to just leave where he was. It was disturbingly similar to how it felt when he was being 'possessed' by the Monster. Just...being in the mind instead of the

body. Wrapped up in regrets that distracted from realities dangers in favor of reimagining the events in a way that he could screw over the creature and take back his body at a critical moment. The town had the occasional streetlight still on even as the night passed into the morning and he had crawled over the fence of the pool at what his watch said was 3 am.

Billy grunted in answer and forced himself to move in order to climb over the gate once more. He wondered how long Byers had been driving around looking for him.

"Why'd you come looking?" Billy asked when he dropped to the other side and dusted off his hands instinctively.

"Steve took Max to your house earlier and then to my house to talk to El when she found you weren't there," Byers explained. The light still shone on Billy and blinded his night vision. Once again, he grunted in reply and followed the other man to his car. The clock on the dash clicked every minute; it jolted his nerves. It was after 4 but Byers didn't put the radio on to keep himself awake.

When they pulled up to his house, Billy felt the same strangling feeling that had forced him to leave it hours before, and that had joined his poolside epiphanies. His house had been a symbol of his freedom. It had been wonderful- he invited who he wanted to invite, he ate what he wanted to, slept when he wanted to, decorated how he wanted to, did what he wanted to: it was his. But now it was a twisted reminder. The knobs on the bathroom cabinets seemed covered in blood and the tub with ice packs when he would go inside to use it normally. The bed was the same place he had sat and sat and waited for the psychic that had defeated it to come.

Billy could almost understand why Neil and Susan had wanted to leave CA now; the memories tied to this place haunted it, ruined it. He couldn't go inside it. Just like the lifeguarding job, Billy couldn't use his house again after what had happened inside it.

After a deep breath, he admitted it. "No."

His driver looked over at him briefly before dropping his gaze to about chest level instead.

"Yeah. Mom's trying to leave too. After Hopper and Bob both and what's happened to Will, she just can't keep staying in that house. I get it."

There was a painful spark inside him at the reassuring feeling that *he and his family did get it*.

Billy Hargrove ended up staying on the couch at the Byers house and woke up to the sight of a clearly relieved Max, who had stayed the night with Eleven and Will, that morning in a location that took him far too long to recognize in his groggy mind.

As it turned out, he was right that he would never stay in his first independent house again.

But where he was wrong was in feeling that he and his step-sibling didn't care about each other. It wasn't that Billy could say that he loved her because he really couldn't tell after missing that feeling for so long. But through newfound banter and the hospital moments and shared trauma, he could say that, as for himself, there was an affection there now. Neil had always tried to force them to play out the caring siblings act. How amusing it was that while one monster had kept him from ever letting that act be reality, another had turned it real.

The kids in the other room seemed to be arguing about something; Max's voice was clearly audible. He didn't pay any heed to them, busy lifting weights as silently as he could in Jonathan Byers room, until his step-sister slammed his door open and stomped over to him to grab his arm. Confused, he went along with it even if she couldn't really tug him to the room of others with brute strength.

Her friends were circled around a low table that was covered in junk: papers, metal figurines, cardboard. Wheeler glared at them both for whatever reason the teen had (not that there weren't many. Not for Max. But for glaring at him? Plenty). Little Byers glanced at them both back and forth but seemed overall excited compared to the other mophead. Henderson was still talking instead of really sparing either stepsibling a glance and Eleven was busy mulling over some figurine in her hands with a bunched up paper and a crayon. Sinclair

looked at Max steadily and kept his gaze strong and steely whenever it did pass over the adult that had attacked him fully intentionally once and since then attempted an apology.

"If I have to play, he does too," Max demanded. Billy blinked slowly once as he tried to comprehend what she had just declared.

"What."

Billy was more a monster than anything resembling a hero. All of these kids were heroes. Eleven was a psychic that had defeated the monsters of another dimension more than once now, damn it. But for some reason, even if he had tore into them and slammed them around and threatened their lives while being controlled by the eldritch monster...even before he had been controlled... they all still went along with it as Max forced him to sit down and join in the nerdy game being played.

AN- He was promptly kicked out of the smartest party after almost getting them all killed with the type of stupid charge only Dustin was proud of.

I wanted to take a slightly different spin on the 'Joyce turns the key earlier' prompt, which is why this begins not only before his fatal injury but also before he gets a chance to have El snap him out of the possession

Because I'm mean and wanted more guilt that way :

Please point out any spelling/grammar error so I can fix it :) Thank you for your time! Please leave a review :D

6. Don't Let It Show

Warnings: Spoilers for the show and references to Runaway Max

This is the end, my friends...

I am very pleased with Sadie Sink's message that Max will definitely be working through problems because of what happened in season 3. The show will not ignore how much fallout would be happening for that poor character and as much as that means that she's going to be tortured with more angst, it's a very necessary result for her.

A big thanks to all my readers and especially my reviewers! This was the first multi-chap I started, and finished, and you all made it a wonderful experience.

Chapter title comes from an Alan Parsons Project song with the same name- fun fact is that Don't Let It Show was re-released as a cassette in 1984 along with the rest of I Robot, the year before season 3 is set

"Turn around

Look at what you seeeeeeeee!"

Lucas and Max shared the same grin as they sung.

"In her face

The mirror of your dreeeeeaaaaams!"

Dustin's response was flipping them off and yet they remained undeterred. Mocking him was far more amusing than it should have been. They were laughing, grinning at his expression. From an outside view, they weren't currently mourning the loss of the Byers and El.

The redhead doubled over until her head was on the floor next to Lucas' knee as she laughed.

Max lay on her bed thinking late that night. The memory of her duet and Dustin's reactions kept making her smile. His girlfriend from Utah had forced him to forever lose his reputation when she made him sing that.

I wonder...

If 'Suzi' hadn't made him do that, would they have had their code, their planck constant or whatever it was, earlier? Early enough that the monster had died before..?

What a stupid, *stupid*, waste of time. Valuable time. Time spent with losses lost that left Max feeling so empty now.

If they ever met in person, Max would hit the kid-

If they ever met in person, Max would smile and stay back with her friends and make fun of Dustin and look every part the 'Max' they expected.

Not for the first time she slid off the bed into a crouch, bundled up with her hands gripping the sides of her head.

Skating down sidewalks under the falling orange leaves should have been more satisfying. Skating had never failed her before. It was her go to therapy just as much as it was her go to entertainment. She loved the activity. But she didn't feel much love for it right now. She didn't feel much of anything.

A month ago, El could've found her as she slid her way around town. The other girl would've just stood there and gave her that rather blank stare and then both wouldn't be able to keep their grins from growing or giggles from escaping.

El couldn't do that anymore. Not unless she was visiting this stupid town. This stupid, stupid, town that took so much.

Hawkins gave her a lot more than she thought it would. A great forest, an arcade, friends. Lucas. El. The party. Many good opportunities to keep away from her step family. Her stepdad couldn't keep track of her and wasn't aware that almost all her friends

were still, despite parental attempts, boys. Billy hadn't bothered her since November. Billy would never bother her again.

Billy would never drive her to school; miserable experiences with miserable music and threats or words that hurt her deeper than she wished they did.

He would never work out disruptively in the living room or sass her mom when Neil was gone.

He would never be tossed around or emotionally manipulated by Neil again.

Maybe he was happier now. Maybe he was nothing at all.

Max had never thought really hard about death before. Well, no; she thought about death plenty. She wondered if she was going to be killed on accident or in a fit of rage (or by demon dogs). She wondered if her friend in CA escaped easily with a broken arm instead of neck that fateful day Billy had shown her just what he was capable of. What Max hadn't really thought too hard on before was what death involved or led to.

Now she did. She didn't want to. But the thoughts chased her down anyways.

Just like the thoughts that encapsulated every 'never again' that arrived after the Fourth of July.

During the years with the Hargrove's Max had discovered one thing- she hated them. But during the summer she discovered another- in no way did she ever want them dead.

She knew that when it became evident to all but her own denial that Billy was a host of the Mindflayer. That night in the sauna had broke her heart. It hurt.

She knew that when Nancy had held the gun out ready and she had asked.

"You're going to kill him, aren't you."

Yes. The answer would be yes. It was them against the monster. The Party against the Mindflayer. All efforts went to protecting them first.

If it was one of them being possessed, would they act differently? If it was Mike, would Nancy still prep that gun no matter what pragmatism said to do?

But Mike and Nancy were close. They were real family. They loved each other.

Max and Billy were a different category altogether. She didn't know what they were. With him dead, she didn't think she ever would.

El would know how to help her. But El was gone. No one was going to pick up her skateboard and offer her a hand when she stumbled on a rough patch of cement and fell.

Before, Max assumed a few things about her relationship with her family.

She wanted her dad back.

She wanted her mom happy but she wanted to leave her.

She wanted to leave Neil behind forever.

She wanted to leave Billy behind forever.

During the week over the forth of July, her assumptions shifted.

Back after Billy had laid off of her and her friends as per her threat, Max determined that she would make it to adulthood without more grief. The two may run into each other ever so often but they would keep it cool. It was impossible to always avoid people forever. Maybe, in years to come, they'd work some sort of arrangement out. She'd get some form of closure on the entire matter that was her abusive step-brother.

There would be no closure now.

That made it all the worse.

She was left like a song unfinished- broken, cut off, waiting for an ending that couldn't possibly arrive. No last conversation, no answers to work through, nothing. Left unsatisfied. Left frustrated. Left longing for closure and grieving its impossibility.

"It wasn't me" "Max!" "He made me do it" "It wasn't me"

Why had that mattered so much to her? Why had it mattered to him? Why, why, why after all they'd gone through would he care to tell her a thing?

Next thing was that shard breaking through the glass and missing her too close position. It had been a lure. There was spittle flying and threats and violence- had it been all a lure? Had It been the one crying and begging her to understand that it 'wasn't' me'? She couldn't ask him now to confirm either way. The dead can't be asked questions.

Why had he been such an asshole to her? She had never tried to hurt him. At first, she had idolized him a bit. She had tried to be his sister. Then she had caved to his manipulations when they began. Why had they began? Was it because at his core Billy was a rotten person? Was it because his dad? What was it? Why had she been hurt over and over again? The dirt on his grave wouldn't answer her.

"Waste."

A waste.

It was like a blow. It stole Max's breath and made her tear up. People thought he was a waste. Her mother had no idea that Billy had died to save Max's life. His father, his own father damn it all, just frowned and said-and said- he was a waste. A waste? If he hadn't stood up in front of them all and been slaughtered then El would be gone. And Max had been on the bottom floor; she would be gone too most likely.

The entire thing had been covered up. The mall fire. The deaths. The truth.

The **truth** was that Billy had been stabbed to death by a vindictive monster that he was trying to keep away from humanity's best hope. El had broke through to them and proved to Max that somewhere inside that mess of a man was still a functioning heart instead of a sociopath. In the last moments, it was his death that filled the stall of time they needed to survive.

Max had to keep that truth a secret. Had to force it to stay inside while she listened to the lies. And she had to watch as the lies were reacted to. As Susan never learned the truth. As his family never did.

Because of that, no one treated him with a hero's funeral of any sorts.

Because of that, Max couldn't go to her mom with her pain.

Because of that, people like Neil called him a waste.

It fractured a bit more of her soul away to hear it.

Lucas was one of the few she could talk to. One of the few that knew the truth. But he couldn't quite grasp why she was hurting. His experiences with Billy involved violence, terror and rage. He really tried to understand for her, but Max herself couldn't understand what she was feeling and why. In some ways it didn't feel like she was feeling at all.

The song was desperately waiting to be finished while the composer lay dead.

She didn't talk with him very often about it all but went to him more than she went to her mom. Because she *couldn't* tell Susan about her pain, she *couldn't*. With the cover story in place, her mom wouldn't understand why she was breaking the ways she was. The divide between mother and daughter grew wider.

It grew worse. Shouldn't the pain and numb go down with time? It didn't. It festered.

She visited his grave. It was as bland and uniform as many of the other graves. She buried his favorite jacket there. The rest of his stuff from his room was being sold for money the family really could use.

His house was on the market as well. The jacket was one of the few things Max didn't put in the box of stuff to sell. A few days later and she unburied it. When no one was around, she'd sling the too big thing onto herself. She had no idea why she was compelled to do so.

Lucas went to the grave with her when he found out she was going. Even if he really didn't like who the tombstone belonged to, the teen would grip her hand and stand strong for her to lean on. They'd go back to the park or to his place after and he'd try to get her to talk to him; tell him how she was feeling, what he could do. Max hoped he knew how much she appreciated it. Other times when they'd see each other she would act completely normal. Normal old Max. Giving off no sign that inner Max was too spread all over the place to feel alright and like herself. When they hung out with the gang, Max was as lively as they were. None of them could tell that she went home at night and hugged herself on the floor by the bed as her dull, empty, confused head kept sleep away.

As those nights and questions grew worse and school kept making her feel dissociative with its damn normality, Max missed El more and more.

One of the few conversations she got to have about it with El had the psychic telling her about what she had seen. El wanted to know if there was a way to contact the woman in Billy's mind and tell her that her son was gone. She was so focused and persistent about the whole matter. Max felt guilty having to explain that some mothers didn't care enough for their kids. As far as she could see from El's explanation of the various memories, the lady had left Max's stepbrother when he was young and never said another thing to him. Had she taken him with her, Max wouldn't have ever had to deal with him. She'd still be in CA and wouldn't know about the pain of emotional manipulation and rage. Billy wouldn't be six feet under. So no, in that moment Max did not want to try and put the work in to find the lady and give her a call. She said so very plainly.

El understood bad papas. Bad mamas took explaining and it left dark brown eyes downcast while green ones stared on guiltily.

There was a little cardboard box of his doodads in her room. When his house had been cleared out, El, Lucas, Steve, Robin and Dustin had helped her find things and organize them. It was appreciated help. Her stepdad refused to touch a hair inside the little building his son had gotten for himself after independence, and emptying a house was hard work without adults. Hopper's place was being emptied and El mostly helped over there but she came to Max's aid when needed. The Byers' house was cleared by everyone, but only a few came to clear Billy's. They weren't there for his sake. They were there for Max. And while she pretended to be fine, she appreciated it. She really did.

The box lay under her bed with her own stuff. She didn't know why she kept it. No one answered that question for her; the box of posters, CD's, hairspray, perfume and some old watch that could only fit a child's wrist remained where it was in her room.

On the anniversary of the day that she had discovered the existence of monsters and stood up to, threatened, the personal monster of her life, Max cried.

Just like other nights that came at random, sleep evaded her. Pain bloomed up and with it the confusion over...everything. If she was sad. If she was glad. If she was frustrated. Billy had been the one to twist her into a kid with anger and control issues; then he died and she was left with them and without closure.

Her knees were tucked to her forehead as she sat on the floor. The bed lay steady behind her back. Red hair spilled over her hands and covered the view from her face. It was okay. She hadn't been really staring at anything anyways.

Max hated to cry. More often than not it was her stepbrother (was, was, was) that made her, whether by quiet, horrible words or physical grip on her wrists. Then the tears would not stay back and no amount of shame or trying stopped them from building up and dripping down. He hadn't made her cry since this day last year. Because he had been quiet on the drives after that. Had behaved. Had ignored her at home. Had listened to her threat. Close to graduation and he'd even seemed to behave civilly to her. When he moved out they still ignored each other but when he stared her way she didn't

see the danger that used to be there. The hate was distracted by other things maybe? She didn't know. But the bastard was making her cry again. Beyond the grave and he still held power over her. The tears built up and stung but did not fall. She gripped her legs tighter.

El wasn't around to feel her mind breaking into little fragments her desperate hands could not hold together. They clutched her head over the messy hair. No amount of tight pressing made the pain go away.

It upset her that she was hurt at all. But the idea of not grieving at all upset her as well. Lose lose.

One year ago and Max had freed herself. One year ago and she had screamed at the sight of a maw of teeth, told a boy her emotions and thoughts, stood up to the person that controlled her life for her. She had stood then. She was crouched now.

As time went on, it grew worse and worse. A weight she couldn't lift on her own crushed her. She wished so much she had a family to go to that would help lift that weight. But her dad was miles away. Her mom couldn't know. Her brother was dead. The outside world couldn't even see that she was hurting.

It stung when the tears began to stream.

AN- Again, a big thank you for your time!

Now, as mentioned before, I'll ask which of the five oneshot AU pathways you would like to see continued. I won't limit possible continuations to just one- after all, where this goes depends on my free time, my muse and you, and so saying only one could be expanded on wouldn't be accurate.

If anyone would like to give a prompt out for any of these, I would likely take that as well :)

For now I'm already considering a continuation of No. 1 but I'd love to hear what others might want.

I hope you enjoyed! Please drop a review c: